Some healing path

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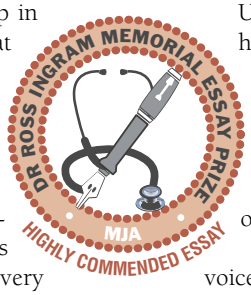

Lowering the coffin, feeling its weight on the strap in my hands and glimpsing the darkness waiting at the bottom of the grave, my cheeks were wet with tears. Only later did I realise that those tears came not only from sorrow, but also from pride.

Contrary to what Australians have been told about Aboriginal rules against mentioning the names of the deceased, we Noongar people of the south-west of Western Australia use names and images at our funerals. I was crying at the funeral of Lomas Roberts, a man so very important to me in the last decade of his life.

In my memory, the photos shown at the funeral service flicker in the dark space into which the body is being lowered, and the old man's name — the "s" sounds prolonged and blending together — is whispered by the old acacia trees at the cemetery. *Kwel ngalak maya wanginy*, Uncle Lomas would have said — "the trees are talking to us".

Only a few months previously, driving back from his sister's funeral, he'd talked of joining her. "Soon", he said, "not long now". In fact, he'd missed the burial because I'd had to rush him to the local hospital almost as soon as the eulogy began. He'd had bypass surgery several months before, and the long drive to the funeral probably exacerbated his tension and stress. On the way back to the city, he tilted the car seat so that he could lie almost horizontal. He said it eased the pain in his chest and throat.

So his death was really no surprise. When he was drinking, he'd show us the x-rays of his cloudy lungs, but, sober again the next day, he'd say it was all fixed and the cancer was gone because he'd had another visit from that old "bush blackfella" who came and went, as if from nowhere.

We'd all nod. Wishing, hoping — none of us liked to see a strong man failing as he was. None of us ever saw this "Mabarn man" (traditional healer). Perhaps he didn't exist. If he did, his efforts in this instance provided no more healing than the mainstream medical system, although at least the very idea gave Uncle Lomas hope and seemed to make him feel better for a while.

Last time I saw Lomas Roberts alive, he was in a hospital bed, his son Geoffrey at his side. Uncle Lomas pulled away his oxygen mask and told us to get a wheelchair and take him home. Then he fell back exhausted, gripping our hands. The nurse adjusted the plastic mask and Uncle Lomas sucked at the oxygen, his eyes wide. He passed away the next day.

Edward, a cousin, had taken him home the last time he had discharged himself. Ed said that when the old man got out of the car he thrust out his chest like in the days when he was still boxing, but by the time he got to the front door he was practically crawling. "What can you do?" we asked one another, "he doesn't like hospital".

He would tell us the doctors were just "kids" — they were white and they were foreign and he couldn't understand what they were saying. Then, changing the topic, he told us he'd sneaked into the toilets for a cigarette, but when he lit up and blew out that big blue cloud of smoke, the sprinklers on the ceiling came on and he got soaked. "It was a pretty nurse that told me off, too", he added, enjoying our laughter.

Uncle Lomas's son, Troy, attended the funeral service handcuffed and chained to a prison guard. Wrists lifted in front of him and pulling on the chain, Troy dragged his reluctant, uniformed companion to the microphone. Locked up for years already and with years to go, Troy looked around the crowd that trembled with him, held the silence like a seasoned performer and spoke some of our names: Ed, Geoff, Graeme, Twinny, Iris, Roma …

"Dad loved what you were doing together", he said, his voice not quite breaking. Troy was referring to a project we were running to retell stories in the old language and revisit the places where those stories belonged.

Troy's words and that project caused my proud tears at the funeral. Perhaps any pride was shameful in the middle of such sorrow and death, but the greatest shame was that we were all so late: the old people were falling away one by one, and Troy was probably not the only one there who understood how it felt to be restrained and isolated.

Lomas Roberts, his sisters and some of their surviving cousins were the most important members of a group — an extended clan, a filial community that mostly only got together at funerals — who had gathered in the last couple of years around old pieces of paper returned from the collection of a long-ago linguist. The clash of paperwork and memory ignited stories, not only those carried on the paper, but also of the linguist's "informants" and other tales they told. There were no welfare narratives in the picture books we developed and took into local schools, and there were no characters to feel sorry for. These stories were peopled by heroes and risk-takers.

A few weeks before his death, we'd filmed Uncle Lomas and his remaining sister, Hazel, visiting the old camping grounds and places mentioned in the old stories that were burning within us. At times, on the audio track, you can hear the waves shushing in the background, trees whispering like they did at the cemetery, and even tongues of flame crackling fiercely. It is hard to make out what they might be trying to tell us, and in some of the audio, even the Elders' voices are unclear because of the sound of the wind in the microphone. It's as if voices are rushing in, all wanting to speak at once.

Uncle Lomas and Aunty Hazel showed us the ruins of the tiny shed where the family had slept when he was a child. They showed us ancient dancing grounds and a whale-dreaming site, and we even went inland to find a granny's grave not visited by these, her grandchildren, since the eldest was an infant. Uncle Lomas had never been there before. He and his sister thanked the farmer for allowing them on his land. Their respectful courtesy made me uncomfortable because it's hard for me to reconcile the Elders' courtesy to the farmer with the historical fact of land stolen from the Aboriginal people.

They led us to another property. The farmer was a man with whom I knew Uncle Lomas loved to have a cup of tea and talk about their families. "Not the same today", they said (as always), shaking their heads as they contemplated the younger generations.

"It's finished", Uncle Lomas often said when we were talking — an old man feeling his own mortality, frustrated by what he

couldn't remember and what was right there at the tip of his tongue but seemingly unreachable. "All gone now."

Respectfully, I have to disagree. When we left the farmer, Uncle Lomas led us to what seemed to be just a bunch of rocks in a cleared paddock, but when we got up close we saw the circles in the rock of a moon waxing and waning and realised it was the site of one of the stories we'd read in the old paperwork and that Uncle Lomas had already known: an immortality story of how the moon never dies, but diminishes and then builds up again. He took us to another place that, by day, is a dry rock hole and yet, at night, holds the reflections of moon and starlight and cool, dark water. He took us to rocks beside the ocean where you might grind up crabs to lure the groper from his blue depths and then leap and drive your spear deep enough to bring the great fish ashore. Other rocks held the footprints of spirit creatures, creatures you might meet the other side of any tree. Always there is this other world, these other possibilities.

So I don't believe that Noongar heritage is "finished". It may have diminished, and it's true that we are a mostly ailing community. Only a minority of my Noongar ancestors survived the first few decades of colonisation, and we've had trouble ever since. If you only see skin colour and the like, we're a truly mixed-up mob these days.

We know the health statistics for Indigenous people, the sorry tale the social indicators tell. Very likely, many of you reading this are working yourselves thin and haggard trying to "close the gap" and improve Indigenous wellbeing.

We need more efficient health service provision and new technologies, but we need other changes too. Relatively recent historical forces that have shaped Aboriginal heritage have rarely been nurturing, and neither are the ways of talking about that history. I'd like to reject the choice we're usually offered between narratives simplistically titled either "stolen generations" or "continuity and native title", because at my old mentor's funeral I felt the power of some other story.

Of course it was an ending. He was finished, he was gone. But my sons were with me, and there were many other young people who mostly only meet each other at funerals. In the tears and hugs, and in gathering around that hollow in the earth there was — there is — an element of "recovery" from grief and illness, and the consolidation of community and belonging.

That's the sort of recovery and consolidation Troy was interested in, and he wants to be part of the recovery and consolidation of old stories and knowledge in a home community. There's a sense of belonging in that, and pride in one's resilience, and also a sense of power that comes from sharing one's Aboriginal heritage with widening circles of people who share the same geographical place.

There's a Noongar word, *biirt*, meaning "path", but also "sinew" and "energy". *Biirdiya*, from the same word, is most often translated as "boss", or "leader", being one who is very familiar with that path and its life-affirming sinews of energy.

I don't suppose such a path of energy can ever be walked in exactly the same way. As such, it's a little like a river, but you can move along it in such a way as to resonate with that energy and let that life force move in you. I think there's a many-layered recovery in the return to such old paths, and in the stories and sounds indigenous to that landscape. Many of us who care about social justice have retraced historical paths, noting how decisions were made and how people were forced to enter the unsafe territory they continue to inhabit. These are necessary journeys, but tend to only lead us into the deadends of victimhood and guilt. *Biirt* is a different kind of path.

Some will insist there is no path from a precolonial past to a postmodern future. Indeed, it is often suggested that, in the interests of their own welfare, Aboriginal people must choose between a precolonial "utopian" past and a future as "economic citizens", or between "assimilation" and "self-determination". But these are false choices. Recent research suggests that the degree of connection with traditional culture correlates with improved Aboriginal wellbeing.[1] If so, consolidating a traditional heritage in home communities is integral to improving Aboriginal health. Uncle Lomas certainly thought so. It made him feel powerful to be helping reconnect younger generations with their heritage, and made us all feel powerful to be sharing it.

Closing the gap may require at least some of us to be walking old paths where we focus less on the choice between opposites or between simple alternatives of past and future, and more on where our journey resonates with the energy of a long-abiding culture. In this way, individuals alive to the rhythms of its spirituality may move together towards creating a respectful society in which even the most vulnerable individuals are safe.

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